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ABSTRACT

The principal objectives of this study were to assist school personnel and community members in the Botwood School zone to assess perceived problems, and to study and clarify communication networks existing between school and community. Two isolated, semirural, coastal communities in central Newfoundland, Canada, provided the experimental setting. Methodology included a demographic, social communication survey; follow-up interviews; and a multidisciplinary inschool assessment of attitudes. A synthesizing conference attended by concerned parties focused the potential future community efforts. (Author/MLF)

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IMPROVING SCHOOL PRACTICES THROUGH PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

by

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A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Division H, March 27-31, 1978 Toronto, Canada

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IMPROVING SCHOOL PRACTICES THROUGH PUBLIC COMMUNICATION -- (A SYNTHESIZING CONFERENCE)

by

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A conjoint school district-community-university faculty research effort directed toward identification, documentation and evaluation of perceived public school problems is the focus of this paper. During a synthesizing conference in which all of the above groups participated, research findings were communicated. This resulted in recommendations for improvement of the school district's short and long-term operations.

In 1973, University faculty involvement began with a series of planning sessions held by Memorial administrators. During 1975 and 1976 a multi-disciplinary research effort was prepared and carried out by research teams of professors visiting the district. Although the original stimulus emerged from discussions held by the District Superintendent and Memorial University's Department Heads of Educational Foundations and Curriculum and Instruction, important contributions to methodology and implementation were made by the

provincial Departments of Social Services and Education as well as the University of New Brunswick's Division of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education.

An excerpt from District Superintendent's report summarizes their perception:

"This research was instituted because of a perceived need to change education. Since this District's inception in 1969, we have believed that the educational institution is at a crucial stage of evolution, and consequently is in great need of re-examination and new directions; hence, the District has always been a proponent of educational planning. In this regard, we firmly believe it is imperative that personnel at both university and district levels incorporate their ideas pertaining to curriculum development, teaching methodologies, innovative practices and educational facilities. This was, to some extent, achieved in the Botwood-Peterview area during the research period...during which the analysis components were carried out over a three-year period." (The Botwood Zone Project, 1977).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The principle objectives of this study were: (1) to assist school personnel and community members of a designated zone within an integrated school district, in assessing and documenting perceived problems, and (2) to study and clarify communication networks existing between school and community --then utilize these same networks to facilitate joint efforts. School district administrators, supervisory personnel and

teaching staff requested the study; they expressed concern about the present and future nature of educational systems and processes.

In Newfoundland, school districts have a relatively short history as most were organized after 1953. At that time, a program of building regional and central high schools was initiated. The District involved in this study was organized in the late 1960's, does not have a long tradition of education theory and practice to fall back upon, and has expressed a strong commitment to planning for educational development and improvement.

In accordance with a systems approach adopted by the Botwood District level administration, it was proposed that research efforts focus upon major systems which constitute the institution of schooling, as well as the analysis of interaction patterns between these systems and the community as a whole. Botwood's socio-economic characteristics are diverse; a considerable number of pupils with different backgrounds is channeled into an integrated, central system of schooling. District personnel believed that a study with this particular base would have far-reaching implications for the zone, the district and the province.

Within the Botwood school zone, the major systems of research concern were identified, after submissions and consideration of proposals, as follows: (1) Socio-cultural, (2) Psychological, (3) Administrative-organizational, (4) Pedagogical, and (5) Curriculum. The Board decided that a study

of the above-mentioned systems would provide a significant perspective including school-related variables, society-related variables and the nature of interaction between the two. Finally, these perspectives would be put together through a process of interpretation by participants. A synthesis would be sought whereby the various research components would be seen as an entity and a basis upon which meaningful change could be planned.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

During the data gathering period of this investigation five samples of segments of the school population were carried out by university personnel, acting individually or in team efforts. Specifically, a student attitude survey (attitudes towards their own schooling) was carried out with day students in the Botwood School Zone during the period December 1974 - January 1975. All students in Grades 6 through 11 responded to this survey.

In addition, during 1974-76 researchers interviewed and maintained continuous contact with school administrators, community leaders and most professionals and opinion leaders in the zone.

In a study of non-standard dialect patterns, research teams collected samples of oral reading from 33 randomly selected pupils from Grades 1 through 6.

Abilities and family environment of children were the topic of research of a Professor who sampled 20 average children

from each of Grades 1, 3, and 5 in two communities in the Botwood Zone.

The grades of sixty-six Grade 11 students in the Botwood high school were compared with provincial averages, by a professor in the Foundations of Education area.

Video-tapes to assess teacher-pupil classroom interaction patterns in the elementary school were made in 22 classrooms under the supervision of a team of educational psychologists.

A professor of educational administration conducted extensive interviews with 16 educators at the Botwood zone and district office levels to study the organization and administration of zone schools.

METHODOLOGY

The concept and design of this investigation was multi-disciplinary, involving a diverse faculty involvement strategy as well as school district, Government Departments of Social Services and Health and community inputs.

Organization and administration of this study's research were fluid; they allowed for maximum participation of professors, district personnel and others who had contributions to make. School district personnel stated they felt the nature and purpose of this project did not lend itself to the imposition of rigorous guidelines that quite possibly would restrict possibilities for participation. Thus, organization of the research evolved with the project and was compatible with its openness and complexity. The degree of organization and administration necessary was accomplished through the working

of two committees - the Steering Committee and the Research and Development Committee. Both committees had important responsibilities to establish networks of communications and to keep these networks in operation.

The Steering Committee consisted of the District Superintendent (Chairman), two Board Supervisors, and four Department Heads of the Faculty of Education, Memorial University. This committee was the official decision-making committee of the project. Major functions were:

1. Arranging for release time (when necessary) for university researchers.

2. Representing the project to others (individuals, groups or institutions) either involved or seeking information, such as University administration, Dean of Education, the Integrated School Board or provincial government officials.

3. Making provisions for financing of the project.

The Research and Development Committee consisted of researchers from the University, one of whom was the Chairman. An executive of this committee consisted of the Chairman, the coordinator of the project (a representative of the School District) and four other professors (one representing each Department of the Faculty of Education). The purpose of this committee of six was as follows:

1. To act as liaison between the R & D Committee and the Steering Committee.

2. To initiate and facilitate plans for the project.

3. To ensure the coordination and integration of

the project, ie.., establish and maintain communication networks.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The November 1977 synthesizing conference was chaired by the Superintendent of the Integrated School District and was attended by research participants from the University as well as District teaching and administrative personnel, community and government agency members. As far as is known, it was the first time in this province that school practices within a district were critically evaluated, with full participation from public groups.

In his opening remarks, the Superintendent summarized the objectives and rationale of the research programme. He noted that the research was being carried out in three phases: analysis, design, and management.

"We have just concluded the analysis phase with the completion of the major research projects", he stated, "let me quote the principal objective of the project: to identify the educational needs in the area served by the Botwood system."

This objective will be achieved through a research programme including descriptive and analytical studies to determine:

(a) The characteristics of children in this District;

(b) The factors and forces which effect growth and development, i.e., medical, social, psychological, cultural, and pedagogical;

(c) Attitudes towards and expectations for education from the various publics which make up society, i.e., the general public, church groups, industry and other institutions of learning;

(d) Educational needs of the community and the tasks to be undertaken - Which tasks can the school do best? Which tasks can best be done by other institutions?

At the synthesizing conference the Superintendent concluded his remarks on the research programme's objective and rationale by stating four distinct purposes:

1. To discuss findings and implications of all major research activities.

2. To achieve a holistic view of the project and to relate the specific pieces of research to one another, as well as to the realities of the Botwood zone.

3. To relate the findings to other parts of the school district and to the conceptions of University researchers.

4. To aid educational planners at both the university and district levels in giving an overall view of progress and problems prevailing in education.

It is interesting to note that of the six major research studies accepted during the two-year period, 1974-1976 (five were presented at this synthesizing conference; the sixth study was completed and submitted in Spring 1977); all conformed to the research concerns identified by the District Superintendent and his staff.

The synthesizing conference lasted one entire working day. Each research report was limited to about 25 minutes of

presentation time with the remainder of each period devoted to audience reactions. In the final hour of the day a panel reaction and general discussion period was held. Here visitors and discussants raised questions or added their own qualifications and interpretations.

The five major research topics under discussion during the day were as follows:

1. A socio-educational study of two communities and their schools;

2. A brief comparison of the marks of Grade XI students in Botwood with the provincial average;

3. An examination of abilities and family environment of the zone's children;

4. A dialect and literacy project in the Exploits Valley Integrated School System;

5. Pupil-teacher classroom instruction in the elementary school.*

The sixth project, submitted in June 1977, concerned the organization and administration of schools in the Botwood Zone.

The Chairman, Director of Instruction in the School District, alerted listeners that, in the presentations, "You are going to be exposed to different schools of philosophy - different alternatives and options in teaching methodologies, i.e., one paper might suggest a structured programme to remedy

* Readers interested in complete details of the above studies may obtain them by writing to: The Superintendent, Exploits Valley Integrated School Board, P.O. Box 70, Grand Falls, Newfoundland A2A 213.

a deficiency of skills; another paper might suggest building a programme around the child's experiences. Hence, the questions we might want to be asking ourselves are:

(a) What kind of programme and approach to teaching do we need so that the culturally different child can cope?

(b) Do we need the structured or experiential type of curriculum or an integration of the two?

(c) What kinds of classroom relationships should exist between teacher and students in this situation?

(d) What significance is there in this setting for a pre-school, and for adult education programmes?"

A summary of the formal presentations was made by the Head of Educational Foundations, Memorial University, after panel members had made their closing remarks. The Department Head noted that four general principles or alternatives seemed to emerge from the discussions in the light of which more specific recommendations could be made; and he added that "If we accomplished that today, then that is perhaps not a bad achievement."

The four principles which emerged from the Department Head's analysis were the following:

(1) Some of the (learning) difficulties which arise might be coped with by informal or non-formal structures, depending upon what we expect to achieve;

(2) Inside a given structure it was suggested that certain techniques and procedures were found to be very effective, some of which are useful in the classroom, and some

outside the classroom;

(3) It was noted that the attitudes and life styles of residents of a given community are important and must be studied by those involved in the teaching-learning process; and

(4) The study of procedures or techniques for interaction within a classroom were held to be important and productive of success compared with random or unstudied inter-relationships in a classroom instructional setting.

In his closing remarks the Superintendent stated that a series of meetings with Botwood zone administrators, to study and implement recommendations stemming from the research project, would commence shortly.

CHANGES RESULTING FROM SYNTHESIZING CONFERENCE

Changes were envisioned in terms of short and long term objectives - objectives which evolved from committee studies of reports and recommendations presented at the conference. A committee made up of teachers, administrators and community members from the Botwood zone was established. The committee's charge was to submit reports to the Superintendent for the implementation of most-needed changes, or short term objectives, for the Peterview portion of the project. To date, the reports acted upon fall principally under the categories of school programming, environmental (community) factors and changes in the school plant and facilities.

SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

Changes in programming in the reading area were seen to be of primary importance and received first consideration. Four

approaches to reading programming were considered:

1. The language experience approach
2. Establishment of a reading resource center
3. A package program, such as DISTAR
4. The Montessori method

Teachers, parents and school administrators are presently involved with in-service sessions concerning the teaching of reading and are now giving consideration to future programming which would involve areas other than reading as well.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Environmental factors were of particular concern. What variables, external to the school, affect students' performance in the Botwood zone?

As a result of these concerns, committee members met with representatives in the fields of health, social services and adult education, and presented the following recommendations:

1. That the Superintendent express his concern to the Department of Social Services concerning adequate diets and general economic conditions in homes which receive social assistance. Specifically, it was recommended that a full-time home-maker be employed to work in the home, with parents, in order to provide assistance, where necessary, for children.

2. That resource persons be invited to address the staff regarding the basic rights of children, the rights of persons receiving social assistance and the nature and availability of social assistance.

3. That it is the school's obligation to educate students for life, and that family life education be considered for specific age groups in the Botwood zone.

4. That school personnel familiarize themselves with the technical and program functions of the Adult Literacy Centre in Botwood, for possible applications of content and technology with students in the schools.

5. That pupil-teacher ratios be studied very carefully in classes where students are experiencing unusual difficulties with academic subjects.

6. In view of the apprehension about school visitations expressed by parents to the social worker in one of the communities, it was recommended that teachers should be encouraged to communicate with parents, through the social worker, regarding the setting of parent-teacher appointments.

In general, it can be stated that today school personnel recognize more clearly the importance of maintaining strong communication networks with the community if school performance is to be improved significantly.

SCHOOL PLANT PHYSICAL STRUCTURES AND FACILITIES

The philosophy and practice of housing or providing school facilities for bused students in the Botwood zone was significantly altered as a result of research reports presented at the synthesizing conference. Instead of gradually phasing down smaller school facilities in one of the outlying communities and busing children to larger Botwood schools for many important

aspects of their education, the educational facilities and resources are now being improved in the smaller, community school. Additional classrooms have been added to accommodate lower pupil-teacher ratios, reading and special education facilities, as well as adequate office space for resource teachers and the school administration.

Also in planning or construction stages are: an adequate assembly room or gymnasium, science area, library space, resource centre, music room, health care area, home economics room, and storage facilities for school supplies, usually found only in the province's larger urban centres.

The committee, established as a result of the synthesizing conference, has stated that, as a result of time limitations, it has been concerned largely with recommendations requiring immediate attention. The longer-term implications of the research are accepted in principle, and will be implemented over a longer period.

CONCLUSION

The project's participants (especially at the school district and community levels) appear to agree that the investigation's primary objectives have been realized.

Over a two-year span, a significant amount of information has been exchanged - and acted upon. Additionally, there is a growing awareness that non-formal aspects of the research project were and are as valuable as the formal efforts.

In this province, the process of problem identification, data collection and analysis of results, culminating in a synthesizing conference, held at the school level, represents a significant breakthrough in communications for public education.

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